

Arkansas Wing Flies For The Kites

By Maj. Blake Sasse

Left, left, right.

Unlike many of the missions Lt. Col. Robert Penton of the Arkansas Wing has flown in his 25-year Civil Air Patrol career, he isn't being guided toward an emergency locator transmitter or a downed airplane, and the person telling him where to go isn't a CAP member. Today, he is working to track down a bird — a Mississippi kite that Arkansas State University graduate student Sabine Schaefer has captured and fitted with a radio transmitter.

Since 2005 the Arkansas Wing has been working with

Dr. James Bednarz and his research assistants to learn more about this large bird in the White River National Wildlife Refuge. "Using CAP and its airplanes to help locate the kites was a natural choice, as ASU worked with CAP on a similar project involving bald eagles in southwestern Arkansas in the 1990s, and CAP has worked with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission on bald eagle nest monitoring and other missions," said Bednarz. Lt. Col. Herb Williams of Arkansas Wing Headquarters coordinates the 50 to 70 hours of flying

Courtesy of Arkansas State University



This Mississippi kite is ready for release after being fitted with a radio transmitter and numbered leg bands.

involved in these “bird flights” and has piloted many of the sorties himself.

“The Mississippi kite is a forest-dwelling bird that has been severely impacted by the loss of bottomland hardwood forests due to clearing for agriculture and other causes, and the White River refuge is one of the largest remaining tracts of this habitat,” said ASU research assistant Sabine Schaefer. Bednarz and his students have been investigating the home range, nest site characteristics and habitat use of the Mississippi kite and a related and even rarer species, the Swallow-tailed kite, in one of the few studies that have used radiotelemetry to track the birds’ activities.

However, before taking to the air, the students must catch the birds. “This was done by going to a previously located kite nest and placing a live decoy bird in a nearby opening,” said Schaefer. The students then broadcast calls of the decoy birds and other species through a loudspeaker, which catches the kites’ interest and causes them to fly toward the decoy, where they are captured in a very hard to see “mist” net. Once in hand, the kites are fitted with a radio transmitter and a back-pack harness and released.

While finding an active radio transmitter is much like locating an ELT, the radio frequencies are different than those normally used by CAP.

Temporary antennas are mounted to both wing struts. Students listen to the signals using headphones attached to a portable radio device held in their lap during the flight. When back on the ground, they enter kite location coordinates into a Geographic Information System in order to compare the type of habitat where the kite was observed to determine their overall preferences.

This information can be invaluable to wildlife biologists. It helps determine what type habitat management activities to perform in order to help rare species.

“As with any low-level summer flying, the flights are usually hot and the unpredictable summer storms often play havoc with flight schedules,” said Penton, “but CAP always comes through.” ▲

Maj. Blake Sasse is the public affairs officer for CAP’s Arkansas Wing and is a professional wildlife biologist.



Photo by Maj. Blake Sasse, Arkansas Wing.

Lt. Col. Robert Penton of Arkansas Wing and Arkansas State University student Sabine Schaefer attach an antenna to an Arkansas Wing aircraft. Since 2005 the wing has helped ASU track a rare bird species called the Mississippi kite.